

THE SHARDAH ALPHABET
(A LINK BETWEEN
KASHMIR AND CENTRAL ASIA)

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THE SHARDA ALPHABET - A Link Between Kashmir and Central Asia.

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Kashmir though geographically not included in Central Asia has been an important member of what is called the Central Asian Cultural family. There is ample evidence to attest the incessant flow of the movements of men, ideas and culture from Kashmir to Central Asia and vice versa from the pre-historic times. The cultural links established pretty long time ago and cemented by the ruling chiefs ruling over both Kashmir and Central Asia, traders and the religious missionaries of the two regions over the years remain vital and unsevered even to-day. Efforts are afoot to make an indepth study of the close and intimate cultural links between Kashmir and Central Asia which by now have stood the test of time. The present brief study is also a humble attempt in this direction.

The traders and religious missionaries from Kashmir journeyed through inhospitable tracts and barren sand dunes amidst adverse climatic conditions and established habitats in and around the oasis scattered all over the desert lands of Central Asia. These in course of time became hub of trade and cultural activities and grew into powerful centres of Central Asian culture and civilisation.¹ The traders and missionaries carried with them besides other things the knowledge of Indian alphabets which soon became popular in this part of Asia and remained in use for several centuries. This is attested to by large number of manuscripts, inscriptions and coins that have come to light from different parts of Central Asia and which are written in the Indian alphabets of Brahmi and Kharoshti. While Kharoshti, the use of which was confined to N.W. India and Central Asia, ceased to be a popular mode of writing after the 4th century, the Brahmi continued to be popular script of a major part of Asia and was used extensively in the countries situated in the Central, Southern and South-eastern parts of the continent. In the course of its development the Brahmi characters assumed different forms in different areas of its use and by about 7th and the succeeding centuries the original appellation gave way to new regional denominations like Central Asian Brahmi, Tibetan, Bangala, Oriya, Nagari, Maharashtri, Tamil, Telegu etc. These scripts though direct descendants of the Brahmi showed several characteristic peculiarities as to justify new nomenclatures.

The Sharada also called Kashmiri or Koshur was one such
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denomination. It evolved as a direct descendant of the Brahmi in Central Asia, Afghanistan, North-Western Pakistan and India (Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh) and though its characters showed remarkable resemblance with earlier Brahmi characters in use in the area exhibited several peculiar developments as to justify a new appellation². It made its appearance first in the 9th. century as is indicated by the available records found in Afghanistan, NWFP included³ Gilgit and Chilas, Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh³. It was an alphabet of Kashmir par excellence and owed its name to the valley which from ancient times bore the alternative name of *Sharada-desha* or *Sharada mandala*. Needless to say that like the Brahmi and the Kharoshti in ancient period the Sharada script became an important vehicle of communication between Kashmir and Central Asia from early Medieval period. This is indicated by large number of records discovered so far, a brief mention of a few important epigraphic and literary documents may be made below.

The inscriptions and the coin legends of the rulers of the famous Hindu Shahi dynasty of Kabul and Gandhara (NWFP) are written in this script. The more important include the inscriptions of Bhimadeva Shahi, ruler of Kabul and Gandhara (NWFP) and maternal grand-father of the queen Didda of Kashmir⁴, Jayapaladeva Shahi, successor of Bhimadeva Shahi,⁵ and his queen Kameshvari Devri.⁶ The history of this famous dynasty which stood as bulwark of Indian defence against foreign invasion for several centuries was little known till the time of Al-Beruni who in his famous magnum opus *Kitab-ul Hind* gave an illustrious account of this dynasty⁷. His narration is aptly supported by the inscriptions and coins that have come to light. The king Mahmud of Ghazni after his incursions into India was obliged to adopt the Sharada alphabet, the alphabet par excellence of the region in his time, for his coin legends⁸.

That Kabul-Gandhara region was very rich in literary and scientific activities is indicated by the discovery of some important manuscripts in the Sharada characters in this area. The most valuable is the famous Bakshali Manuscript, the title of which is not preserved and the present appellation is due to the name of the place of its discovery.⁹ It contains an important work on mathematics and is known for its several distinct peculiarities not traceable in the early Indian mathematical treatises. The last known Sharada record from the Kabul-Gandhara (NWFP) region belong to 1461 A.D.¹⁰

While the continued use of the Brahmi script in Central Asia led in course of time to the development of its Central Asian variety it is not exactly known when the Sharada alphabet the direct descendant of Brahmi made its appearance in Central Asia. While the Brahmi and the Kharoshti scripts of Central Asian varieties have been closely studied and analysed, the Sharada alphabet of Central Asia has not received the attention it deserved. It may be due to the paucity of the published material for study as most of the epigraphic

and literary records discovered from different parts of the region and now preserved in different museums and libraries of the world still remain undocumented, uncatalogued, unedited and unpublished. This is all the more regrettable as bulk of the written material discovered from Central Asia like the Bower¹¹ and Bakshali Manuscripts and the Kharoshti Tablets¹² are secular in nature and shed flood of light on the contemporary socio-economic and cultural life of the people and on the development of scientific and technological studies in the region.

In Kashmir the earlier Brahmi alphabet was replaced by its descendant the Sharada also called Kashmiri or *Koshur* around 9th, Century when the alphabet makes its appearance in the coins and inscriptions of king Avantivarman (855-883 A.D.)¹³. It was the only alphabet in use in the valley from the 9th, Century till the advent of Muslim rule in the 14th century, as is indicated by the epigraphic and numismatic records, only a limited number of which, however, has been preserved though at one time Kashmir was very rich in epigraphic wealth as is attested to by Kalhana who utilized this enormous source for writing his *Rajatarangini*¹⁴.

The advent of Muslim rule led to the introduction of Persio-Arabic script technically called *Nastalikh* in the valley by the Central Asian Sufi saints, scholars and Islamic missionaries. However, even with the introduction of the new mode of writing the use of the Sharada script was not discarded. Its use continued unabated and soon became popular with the Sultans and Central Asian saints and scholars, just as the Persio-Arabic script was in no time mastered by the non-Muslim population of the valley. Henceforth, both the scripts came to be used side by side both in official and private documents. Many court documents belonging to the 15th and the subsequent centuries are written both in the Sharada and the *Nastalikh* and the popular use of both the scripts is amply demonstrated by the epitaphs on several graves discovered in different cemeteries in the valley which are written both in the Sharada and the *Nastalikh*. As an example may be cited the famous epitaph of one Said Khan inscribed on a grave in the cemetery near the Western gate of Hariparbat in Srinagar which is dated in the reign of Muhammad Shah (1484-1528 A.D.)¹⁵. The Sharada epigraphic records of the Sultanate period belong to the reigns of Shihab-ud-Din (1354/55-1373 A.D.)¹⁶, Sikandar (1389-1413 AD)¹⁷ Zain-ul-Abidin (1420-70 A.D.)¹⁸ and Hasan Shah (1472-1484 AD)¹⁹. The famous will or '*wasiyat'-namah* of the famous sufi saint Maqdoom Saheb is written both in the Sharada and the *Nastalikh*.

Thus both the Sharada and the *Nastalikh* scripts became vehicles of communication in Kashmiri, Sanskrit and Persian languages. Many well known Persian texts of Central Asia on folk lore, literature, medicine, science and technology were transcribed from *Nastalikh* into Sharada script and several

known Sanskrit and Kashmiri texts from Sharada into Nastalikh to facilitate their study.

It is not unlikely that besides Kashmir and Kabul-Gandhar region, the practice of the simultaneous use of the Sharada and the Nastalikh was followed in other parts of Central Asia. Thus like the Brahmi and the Kharoshti in the earlier period the Sharada script in the medieval period was a vital link in the chain of transmission of ideas, knowledge and culture between Kashmir and Central Asia.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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